

/7 cont./

- 127 Droeba, 1884-1885; 3. "Ocherk Abkhazskoy mifologii /Sketch of Abkhaz Mythology/, " by verovaniya abkhaztsev /Religious Beliefs of the Abkhaz/, " by A. , in the Sbornik svedenii o kavkazskikh gortsakh, No. V; and 5. "Ekonomicheskoe polozheniye tuzemnago naseleniya Sukhumskago otdiela /The Economic Condition of the Native Population of the Sukhum District/, " same author, in the same Sbornik, VI.

M. Dzhanaashvili. April 25, 1892, Tiflis.

/8/

I.

000

Abkhazia and the Abkhaz

The Abkhaz -- His Character -- Robberies, Raids, and Thieving -- Eloquence of the Abkhaz -- Blood Vengeance -- Love of Homeland -- Hospitality, Politeness, and Friendliness -- Honesty -- Values -- Folk Games -- Poetry.

142

The Abkhaz is a mountaineer of medium stature, slender, swarthy, with black hair and eyes. He is fearless, brave, and proud, but at the same time capricious and extremely quick-tempered. Besides his inborn giftedness, his beauty, and, in general, the likeable aspects of his character, he also exhibits quite a few negative traits, of which we shall speak below.

181

Since the most ancient times the Abkhaz have been known as the most fearless and daring of robbers. They constantly raided their neighbors, pillaging and ruining them. For that matter, the habit of robbing and raiding is common to all the mountaineers in general. "Without robbery and raids, life is not worth living to a mountaineer," says Sergei Mech in his work. All his poetry, all the beauty of his existence is in this trait of the mountaineer. Only the tiger can be compared to the mountaineer in the suddenness and swiftness of his attack on a sleeping village in the deep, dark night. Going for plunder, the mountaineer is sure that

579

/8 cont. /

579 nothing will give him away or betray him, neither his dagger, always kept in a sheath, nor the glitter of his rifle, wrapped in a cover, nor the soft, inaudible steps of his feet outfitted in bast shoes, nor his horse, well-trained for night-riding, nor, finally, his tongue, the hissing sounds of which resemble the rustling of leaves... With bloodshot eyes, his dagger in one hand and his pistol in the other, the mountaineer throws himself into the battle with a frightful whoop, and at this moment he forgets everything but victory... Such are the Abkhaz and their neighbors.

Even now the Abkhaz looks upon thieving as an act of boldness, of heroism, /9/ and almost as much of a necessity as food and drink. All the Abkhaz, from the small to the great, suffer equally from this ailment -- men, women, and children, and the Abkhazian upper class have even made it their regular occupation. Times and circumstances change, generation after generation slowly but steadily introduces new cultural principles into Abkhaz life -- and robbery alone remains the favorite occupation, as though hallowed by the authority of a hoary antiquity...

867 As a matter of fact, what is surprising about it? While still a child, the Abkhaz is subjected to the irresistible influence of the circumstances surrounding him and of all possible elemental forces. And as he grows up, he acts according to these external elemental influences or internal moral influences. Now, to what forces is the Abkhaz exposed in his youth, and what moral principles does he derive from the phenomena and facts of nature and the milieu around him?... There he is, as a child, holding in his hand a knife with a handle bigger than he is, pasturing buffalo or goats in the forest or in the mountains, and he observes what goes on before his eyes: here a fox, lying in wait for a careless wild chicken, catches its prey and carries it into the depths of the forest to finish it off; there a half-starved wolf snatches a lamb from the herd, under the eyes of the unwary shepherd -- a boy like himself; and there, farther away, a bird of prey, waiting until the right moment, shoots down like an arrow upon one of the weaker forest-dwellers and, sinking its claws into its body, flies up with its prey and disappears into

/9 cont. /

867 the blue skies... and so it is, day after day. These very same examples of unpunished robbery and violence, repeated daily, must leave deep traces in the conscience of the observant young shepherd. Upon his return home, phenomena he has observed in nature are consolidated and, as it were, sanctified in his eyes by the authority of the older members of the family: every day there are discussions and squabbles about the loss or stealing of cattle; on the one hand, he hears words of praise and approval applied to stealing, and, on the other hand, curses addressed to the thief; finally he sees how the housewife, the lawfulness of whose behavior he has never once thought of doubting, very cautiously digs up the buried meat of an animal stolen from the neighbors and cooks it... And when the child, grown wise by observing his milieu and by the successful experiences of his relatives, /10/ matures into a grown youth, his parents and the leading members of the family in general provide him with arms, having given him their blessing beforehand with the words: "Now make your own living, make your fortune by thievery and robbery, the same as all the people your age." Hence, thievery here has not only the status of an example worthy to be followed when the proper occasion presents itself; it is presented as an obligatory modus vivendi, as a dogma, sanctioned by the authority of the parents and of the older members of the family in general.

867
579
538 Let us turn our attention to still another circumstance. As is well known, children love fairy tales and all kinds of stories and legends. In the long winter nights, the old men and women tell stories to the Abkhaz children. But the majority of such tales are likewise harmful from the point of view of moral influence, for the contents of these legends, fairy tales, and stories go no further than eulogies of stealing, robbery, and raiding; in them are sung the praises of the daring, determination, and bravery of some "abrag" (abrek = bandit), of his resourcefulness as a thief, his keen-wittedness when in difficulties, his audacity in robbing and seizing another man's property. This may provide a partial explanation of the regrettable phenomenon in the life of the Abkhaz, that even persons who have had a modicum of secondary education

/10 cont. /

867 immediately upon their return home revert to the practice ac-
579 quired in childhood -- stealing. This is of course not the fault
of the school or of secondary education, but of the traditional
views on this "trade," contact with which kills every other way
of looking at it, as the lone wheat-stalk is smothered among the
weeds that surround it.

579 In his stealing, the Abkhaz is treacherous. The best of
friends, to all appearances, do not hesitate to steal from each
other, and in Abkhazia it is no rare thing for brother to steal
from brother, father from son, or son from father. It is almost
proverbial that when an Abkhaz has no one to steal from, he
robs himself. There have been instances of an Abkhaz stealing
a horse from a neighbor on a dark night, taking it miles and
miles away and exchanging it for another, riding back home on
this fresh horse the same night, and the next morning, the minute
his neighbor raised the alarm, rushing over and being the first to
offer his sympathy and joining the chorus of people calling down
curses on the thief and dashing off with the others in frenzied
pursuit.

685 The Abkhaz thief will not admit his crime, even /11/ when
579 he could be convicted on the evidence of witnesses. When a
692 robbery case is tried at village meetings, a decision of the judge
in favor of the accused is not infrequently influenced by the au-
dacity of the latter's pretexts, by his shameless subterfuges, and by
his so-called "talking circles around them." In general at such
[537] meetings, any exhibition of sly rhetoric, however shameless, on
the part of a notorious thief finds not only attentive listeners but
even admirers. "He saved himself by the bravery of his speech,"
they say in such cases.

And though such "eloquence" on the part of the thief often
saves the guilty one from punishment, the victim, understandably,
does not believe in his innocence and tries to get back at him
at the proper moment for his losses, according to the formula of
an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

682 At present vengeance for spilled blood is on the wane, but
at one time it was one of the most important features of Abkhaz
life. The custom of blood-revenge puts the relatives of a person

/18 cont./

428 (eits'bshakhu /see foreign text/). After the settlement for seniority and minority, all that is left is divided equally among the brothers; in addition, the youngest receives the father's house, yard, etc. Sisters receive less than brothers.

593 Kind and affable in public, the Abkhaz at home is rather stern, imperious, and so taciturn that it is as if he were too lazy, or at any rate not sufficiently inclined, to spare a single kind or friendly word for the members of his household. The Abkhaz woman enjoys a great deal of freedom. She is no less busy than the man; for instance, she carries the maize to the mill herself, and in some places she grinds it herself with a hand mill. In summer, she works, hoe in hand, side by side with the man in the maize-field. The wives of the members of the higher classes [565] toil no less than their husbands, but, on the other hand, they enjoy more freedom and are held more in esteem than is the case otherwise.

562 A woman is treated with respect and esteem by young and old. Women attend community meetings, mourning rites, [535] funeral banquets; they are present at the gatherings of the men and dance with them. There have been instances of women [579] being the leaders of the abragi in night raids. Women perform religious rites and ceremonies. But with all this, the Abkhaz woman is expected to be innocent and modest, and to speak to older men politely and courteously.

562 If her husband divorces her without sufficient reason, the 586 Abkhaz woman has the right to appear at the village meeting and [692] defend herself. And she skillfully uses this right: she goes to the meeting with as much determination as her husband, and defends herself with great eloquence. While the husband can divorce his wife on various grounds, she can do the same to her husband if he has done her any wrong.

/18 cont./

III.

Education -- The Educated -- The Educators

565

566

[567]

• [579]

While the upper class in Abkhazia enjoyed privilege and power, the situation of the lower classes was one of great oppression; /19/ the batoni (master, feudal lord) looked upon his subject, his slave, as a commodity; he could sell or pawn him according to circumstances. However, even after the abolition of slavery, the position of the peasantry did not improve, due to the fact that the nobility did not cease from robbery and pillage and plunder until the most recent times.

565

608

Under such a state of affairs, all the peasantry could do was to resign itself to feudal conditions and try, wherever possible, to get protection. The best method lay in the custom of adoption, or the rearing of the sons of the aristocrats by the peasants. Thanks to this custom, the aristocrats themselves were strengthened, for in this way they gained in the peasants their most faithful supporters, while at the same time freeing their wives from the onerous duty of bringing up and feeding their own children. This is the reason that in all Abkhazia there is not a single peasant who has not reared one or several princes and nobles; as a consequence of this custom, hardly one per cent of the nobles have been nursed at their own mother's breast.

344

565

[533]

[538]

Before the beginning of childbirth in a family of the aristocracy (didebuli), on the one hand relatives and acquaintances and, on the other hand, the future foster-mothers of the expected child, accompanied by their husbands and female relatives in order to be able to bear the newborn foster-child back to their village with due ceremony, begin to gather around the pregnant woman. During the childbirth, girls from the village also come to visit the expectant mother in order to distract her and to relieve her sufferings during labor with gay songs and the telling of fables and fairy tales. The husband is absent during this time. According to the customs of the country, he is not allowed to be present when his wife gives birth and therefore leaves the home. Above

/21 cont./

565 This, however, does not exhaust the role of the ward with
608 regard to his foster parent. He is the main character in the joys
and sorrows of his foster parent; in all the occasions of his life
that have any importance. Thus, when his foster mother, or her
[765] husband, or one of their children dies, he bewails them bitterly,
[764] dresses in mourning, lets his hair grow, buys the coffin at his own
expense, and takes care of the arrangements and the ceremonial
for the mourning and the funeral of the deceased. When the
funeral banquet is given, he provides a sheep or a horse and
again arranges everything. The ward also is the main character
[583] when the son of his foster mother abducts a girl to be his wife;
if the relatives of the girl pursue the abductor, the princely ward
comes to his aid with words and weapons and does not give up
the abducted girl; subsequently he keeps her at his house until
the matter is definitely settled, for none of the relatives of the
abducted girl would dare to attack his home.

[584] If, on the other hand, the marriage of the son or daughter
of the foster father is arranged peacefully by the voluntary con-
sent of both sides, then here, too, the princely ward is considered
the bridegroom's best man and presents the bride with money, a
horse, etc.

The foster parents in turn do not fail to perform their duties
with regard to their ward, whom they call their sun, their /22/
sacredness, and by whose name they swear. Every year at
[431] Christmastide they give him presents, such as cheese, capons,
and bread; at Easter, a lamb or a kid and "chumukhkvati." These
presents are the obligatory outward signs of sincere liking and
friendship on the part of lesser ones ("lower brotherhood") towards
those of higher rank; with their cessation the mutual friendship is
also broken off.

The sons of the foster mother are usually the bosom friends
and accomplices of the ward in his nocturnal thieving adventures.
•[579] That is why a prince or nobleman always takes the sons of his
foster mother with him on his thieving expeditions; he knows that

/22 cont./

565 they are prepared to sacrifice their lives for him if necessary.

608 When a ward dies, the grief and sorrow of the foster parents
[577] are unbounded; for his funeral they furnish a shroud and money;

[764] they also bring one or two bulls, sheep, etc. for the funeral
[765] repast for the deceased. When their ward marries, they give

[585] him all kinds of assistance through their personal labor. They
also present him with fattened animals and bring presents to
his bride as well.

608 Among the Abkhaz another type of wardship also exists,
565 namely, that of an adult man being invited to assume the role
796 of ward. The Abkhaz peasant invites such a man with the
words, "I wish to take you into my house and honor you accord-
ing to my means." On the appointed day, the person invited
goes to the house of his future foster father and takes along a
few additional people. During the supper the host and his
relatives kneel down in front of their ward-to-be and give
him a glass of wine; they then stand and one of them addresses
to him the following speech: "From this day on we regard you
as having been nursed in our family; we are of the same spirit
as you and will begrudge you nothing; we hope that you, too,
will begrudge us nothing; you will be held in higher esteem
than the other wards." After this they present him with a few
rubles and give something to his companions (khadzh /see foreign
text/). While handing over the presents, they say, "Vadcha
enup" (a present for you). This ceremony ends in the following
way: on a carpet, spread on the floor, a chest is placed, on
which the wife of the host of the house, i. e., the future foster
mother, seats herself; the other women surround her. Then
the ward-to-be enters through the open door, stands in front of
the hostess seated on the chest, greets her, /23/ and thrice
touches with his lips the nipple of her breast, or, as the Abkhaz
say, "bites her nipples three times"; after each time he repeats,
"from this day on you are my own mother." And indeed, from
608 this time on exactly the same mutual relations obtain between
565 them as in the first case where another's child is fully reared.
It need hardly be said that, besides the princes and nobles, the

/55.cont./

755 sick man's accuser, taking off his belt to bear witness to the
782 sincerity of his address to Shasha, approaches the anvil and
326 utters a prayer in which he requests Shasha to deliver the
guilty one from his ailment, with a pledge that after his re-
covery the sick man will come himself to beg for forgiveness
from Shasha; then, leaving a piece of iron in the smithy, he
goes to set the patient's mind at rest. If the sick man re-
covers, he satisfies the injured one and goes with him to the
smithy, and, having put a small silver coin (no less than two
rubles) on the anvil, thanks Shasha for his recovery; the
ram, the bread, and the wine that he has brought with him
are given to the blacksmith, from whom, after the prayer,
he receives pieces of the ram's liver and heart; he sends
these to his family as a token of Shasha's forgiveness. In
company with his relatives, the injured party, and the black-
smith, he himself eats the food that was brought along in the
blacksmith's house.

21.

The Prayer to Eyrig-aatsnykh

579 Eyrig-aatsnykh is the patron of stealing, plundering, and
782 robbery. Beyond the river Bzyb this deity is called
[776] Chugurukhnykh; all the Abkhaz setting out to steal among
[778] the Ubykh, Shapsug, and other mountain-dwellers used to
bring offerings to Chugurukhnykh, whose altar, if this ex-
pression may be used here, /56/ was located on a cliff be-
yond the fortification of Gagra. Prayers to this god are
offered only by those who practice the "arts" of which he is
the patron. An offering of four cone-shaped loaves of bread
is brought; a prayer is said over them, asking a blessing upon
the enterprise and giving a promise to sacrifice something else
to the god in case of success. The loaves of bread are taken
along on the trip. The thank-offering consists of something
of the stolen goods, and if a horse or a head of cattle is taken,
the sacrifice consists of a lock of the stolen animal's hair;

/56 cont. /

579 all this is hung on trees near the place where Eyrig-aatsnykh
782 is believed to have his permanent abode.

22.

Anybs-nykha-dudryupsh

776

Anybs-nykha-dudryupsh is worshiped as the mightiest of the gods. Mt. Dudryupsh is regarded as his abode. Those

[778]

who dare to climb this mountain are immediately punished with blindness; therefore prayers and sacrifices to this deity are offered at the foot of the mountain. As a deity, Anybs-nykha has no exclusive, professional field of authority, but he is worshiped as higher and mightier than all the other gods.

[782]

The arrangement of prayers and sacrifices to him is the same as to Sha-sha, with the difference that when an oath is taken in his name, the formula is "May Anybs-nykha send me blindness and every ailment . . . , "etc.

778

[783]

Anybs-nykha's residence is under the exclusive supervision of the large Abkhaz family Ankaħ-Chichba. The Chichba have enjoyed this right for several generations; it is a source of great profit to them, since permission to bring sacrifices to this deity must be bought from them with presents. Not far from the top of Mt. Dudryupsh, the actual abode of Anybs-nykha, a stone lies under an oak; on this stone the image of the Holy Virgin has been carved. All those who

[782]

take an oath must put a coin or something metal under this stone, and woe to him who is tempted to take anything away, even one little thing, from among the objects lying there!

23.

/57/ Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve

782

[796]

[262]

On Christmas Eve in every family chickens are killed and four kvakvari (small loaves of bread stuffed with cheese)